Poster

'Missiles' Of Hope

A Commentary
By Nicholas von Hoffman

Wednesday night ABC cleared our three hours of regularly scheduled network trash to give us what it called "one of the most incredible dramas you've ever seen. Anywhere." That may be a fairer description of "The missiles of October" than ABC intended for its dramatization of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Presented as an example of a heretofore unknown genre of dramatic literature named "the theater of fact," it's best received as an electronic history book for beginners. It is best understood, however, as a big broadcasting company's holiday message of hope.

Contrary to what you might expect, "The Missiles of October" isn't dull-witted anti-Communist propaganda. If it had been propaganda there might have been a chance for it as drama. In part some of Shakespeare's historical plays stand up because he didn't let the facts get in the way of telling his audience how blessed they were to have the Tudor family sitting on the English throne.

The difficulty with ABC's theater of fact is that it has too many American facts, too few Russian facts and no very good way to organize any of them. Shot and directed in the pseudo cinema verite style of "Kojak," a deceptively authoritative tone is given to this frightening series of events that nobody understands now, 12 years after they took place.

To this day we don't know why the Russians put those missiles in Cuba. The most plausible explanation is that their ICBM's were then so primitive or nonexistent that they had no way of hitting the continental United States unless they could get up close and base themselves in Cuba. This non-fact doesn't get on the air because the Russian part of the drama has to rely on Khrushchev's memoirs for its sources—there aren't any others—and he's not going to admit his people were driven to the Cuban adventure out of sheer weakness.

Thus most of the drama centers on President John Kennedy and his advisers, a number of whom have written their versions of how it came to pass that the United States delivered a military ultimatum and how the Russians knuckled under to it. These conflicting and overlapping views are reflected in the script, but only someone who has done a lot of extracurricular reading would be able to pick his way through the confusion of clues to ask himself what was going on in the Oval Office anyhow.

Did Kennedy eschew the safe paths of diplomacy for needlessly bellicose posturing? Did he exploit these strategically unimportant missiles, not to chase the Russians out of the socialist fleshpots of Havana, but to win a congressional election? Did the American intelligence services foul up again in Cuba? Were they, as usual, the last people on earth to know what the Russians were up to? Did Kennedy make some of the most important decisions of the crisis in a disconcertingly off-handed way?

Good drama need not answer any of these questions, but this is "theater of fact," and the only reason to collect facts is to pose questions of this sort. Then, was this enormously costly effort a failure?

Decidedly not. "The Missiles of October" isn't about missiles or October or Russians or Cuba. It's about the American presidency. The people who made the program may not have consciously intended to do a restoration job on the reputation of the office and its occupants, but the message which comes across is one which says the time of the god-Presidents will come again.

So it makes sense to seize on Kennedy, the last man to be President whom most Americans, rightly or wrongly, have much respect for.

How much better to back up 12 years and delineate a man of legend who proves that, while the office is too big and too powerful for a single individual, we are a people who can father the strong, tragic leadership which can live up to the role of elected god, hero and national parent. Hence what comes across is Abe Lincoln Jr., the sorrowful, retrospective, yet reasonable and eloquently determined leader.

It's for that reason that the fashionable glitter and the snobbish chi-chi of the Camelot years was omitted from the drama. Since there is no serious effort being made to change the nature of this impossible and overly powerful office, what we need is a fairy tale that tells us that we have people who can adequately fill it.

We don't, but that is nevertheless the American Broadcasting Company's message of Christmas hope and covert political dispair.

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